

27 JAN 1977

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Zbigniew Brzezinski
Assistant to the President for National
Security Affairs

SUBJECT : Reconnaissance Aircraft Overflight of
Cuba

1. This memorandum responds to some of the questions raised during the discussion of reconnaissance overflight of Cuba during yesterday's NSC meeting.

2. Subsequent to the Cuban missile crisis, the Intelligence Community was highly dependent on manned overflight of Cuba by U-2 aircraft to monitor the status of Cuban military forces, the supply of Soviet military equipment to Cuba and the periodic deployment of Soviet air and naval units to that island. As the capability and capacity of our film-return photo-satellite reconnaissance systems improved, the frequency of aircraft overflight was incrementally reduced. By 1970, the satellites were providing the bulk of the photographic coverage of Cuban targets and aircraft were used primarily to respond to time-sensitive intelligence requirements which could not be met by the film-return satellite systems. By mid-1974, when the SR-71 replaced the U-2 for overflight of Cuba, it was recognized that the justification for continued overflight was based primarily on the political requirement to maintain a continuing US reconnaissance presence over the island. A continuing standby overflight capability was also provided for to handle time-sensitive national intelligence problems.

3.

This schedule, which was established by Secretary Kissinger, has generally been adhered to unless accelerated or delayed by the Operations Advisory Group or adversely affected by weather.

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4. From the national intelligence point of view, there are no longer any requirements justifying continuing overflight of Cuba by manned aircraft.

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5. From the political point of view, the continuation of SR-71 flights was intended to serve as a constant reminder to Havana of US interest and concern about Cuba. Operationally, the flights were intended to maintain enough presence to preserve the option of using SR-71's in a period of tension without the flights themselves representing a major new ingredient. To the Cubans, the flights have been viewed with considerable irritation as violations of Cuban sovereignty. Termination of the SR-71 reconnaissance program would likely be read by Havana as a signal of possible interest by Washington in exploring avenues for improved relations.

/s/ E. H. Knoche
E. H. Knoche
Acting Director

CONCUR:

Associate Deputy Director for Intelligence

28 January 1977
Date

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